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DE RUEHGB #1848/01 1551414
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 041414Z JUN 07
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1527
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001848

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/03/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL I2

SUBJECT: ISCI POLITICAL COMMITTEE DIALOGUE FOCUSES ON
CAUSES OF VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTH

REF: BAGHDAD 1672 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Robert Gilchrist for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The conversation in the third meeting of the ISCI-U.S. political committee focused on causes of violence in Iraq's central and southern provinces and how to encourage moderates. While recognizing violence in Shi'a-majority areas as a problem, ISCI participants urged the U.S. to focus on al-Qaeda and the Baathists as the most pressing security challenges. In the center and south, they argued for a combination of picking strong leaders for the Iraqi security forces; expanding the Najaf governance model (led by ISCI); and supporting the marja'iya. The DCM urged ISCI to play a more active and public role as a moderating influence in the center and south. End summary.

¶2. (C) The meeting took place on May 29. Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi and ISCI parliamentarians Humam Hamoudi and Jalal al-Din al-Saghir participated from the ISCI side. The U.S. side included the DCM, Legal Advisor, Regional Affairs Officer, PolOff, and Staff Assistant.

¶3. (C) The DCM opened the session by noting U.S. concern with the recent violence in Basrah, Diwaniya, Dhi Qar, and elsewhere in the Shi'a-majority central and southern governorates. He noted that the U.S. does not have all the tools to address the causes of this violence and that the U.S. looked to ISCI to provide a moderating influence. The issue of violence in the south, the DCM continued, was also closely related to several topics Abdel Mehdi had proposed, including federalism and Iraq's neighbors.

Abdel Mehdi: Focus on AQI and the Baathists

¶4. (C) Abdel Mehdi noted that the long history of violence and oppression in Iraq had conditioned Iraqis to learn the ways of violence. Developing moderation, he argued, required strong leaders and support for them. Abdel Mehdi noted parenthetically that the U.S. had initially "punished" ISCI in Iraq because of its ties to Iran. "We told you you cannot combat extremism by making moderates weak." Abdel Mehdi said that to deal with extremists "you have to open a political dialogue and at the same time be decisive with all those outside the law." He argued that particular attention be paid to al-Qaeda and the Baathists, as these groups presented challenges that could not be solved by the political process.

Hamoudi: Support Marja'iya and Beware Contradictory Messages

¶ 15. (C) Hamoudi offered two pieces of advice for preventing extremism in Iraq. First, he argued for "moral and practical support" for the Shi'a marja'iya in Najaf. The long education and training necessary before a Shi'a cleric could pronounce fatwas, Hamoudi argued, made the marja'iya a force for moderation that even someone like Muqtada al-Sadr had to respect, at least on the surface. He suggested undercutting Shi'a extremism by emphasizing Muqtada al-Sadr's subordination to the marja'iya. Second, he argued that the U.S. should be careful about giving "contradictory messages" to extremists. On the one hand the U.S. called extremists "terrorists" and fought them, Hamoudi continued, but the U.S. then made the mistake of calling the same people "the resistance" and trying to respond to their political demands, e.g. on de-Baathification. Thus, the U.S. gave extremists a further incentive to use violence, Hamoudi argued. He closed by criticizing the Baghdad Security Plan for giving a similar message because "you do not see U.S. troops in the areas where the violence is coming from."

Al-Saghir: Replicate the ISCI-Led Najaf Model

¶ 16. (C) Noting ironically that he was considered an extremist by many, al-Saghir said that the Shi'a population, poor and undeveloped as it was, unfortunately offered fertile ground for extremists to exploit. ISCI, he said, presented its moderate side but also recognized the need to "enter into the environment" of the extremists in order to learn how to deal with them better. Moderate Iraqi leaders needed to create an alternative to extremism, al-Saghir argued. He pointed to ISCI-led Najaf governorate as a place that offered such an

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alternative. He urged support for Najaf so that it can become a model for getting results) to show how moderation can be successful.

¶ 17. (C) The DCM thanked Abdel Mehdi, Hamoudi, and al-Saghir for their presentations, saying that the U.S. agreed the door had to be left open for political dialogue while at the same time giving a consistent message that there is no room to use violence to solve political problems. He urged ISCI to play a more public role in bringing groups into the political process and stressed the importance of continuing work on improving rule of law institutions. PolOff noted that U.S. officials indicated their deep respect for the marja'ia in Najaf in public and private settings and welcomed concrete suggestions from ISCI for making this support practical as well as moral. PolOff also noted the contrast between Diwaniya, also an ISCI-led province, and Najaf, and suggested that ISCI leadership develop ideas for improving the situation in Diwaniya.

¶ 18. (C) Abdel Mehdi concluded that a general problem in the south was soft security. Security responsibility, he claimed, "has been given to weak individuals." He argued for a better selection process for ISF leaders in the south, suggesting that the model by which the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) was built should be replicated on a larger scale.

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